Everyday sexuality and identity: de-differentiating the sexual self in social work

Poole, N. , Mo, T. and Brusey, J.

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Sexual Identities and Sexuality in Social Work

Research and Reflections from Women in the Field

Edited by

PRISCILLA DUNK-WEST
Coventry University, UK

TRISH HAFFORD-LETCHFIELD
Middlesex University, UK

chapter:
Dunk-West, P.

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Chapter 11

Everyday Sexuality and Identity: De-differentiating the Sexual Self in Social Work

Priscilla Dunk-West

Introduction

Social workers regularly explore service users' personal information including their backgrounds and upbringing, their attitudes and values, as well as the nature of their familial and intimate relationships. The social work assessment is broadly conceived of as providing the necessary signposts or categories for capturing important information about differing aspects of one's life. Compartmentalizing identity in this way helps social workers identify areas for concern and action. Indeed, assessments tend to highlight areas of pathology, and if details about one's intimate relationships are covered in the assessment, it is likely to be because it is an area for concern. Social workers do not routinely ask people to explain their sexual or intimate relationships or identities. Yet, in our contemporary world, in which sexual mores have evolved away from their traditional ties with reproduction, sexuality is increasingly being seen as important in social work. How those in helping professions ought to deal with the details about their clients' intimate lives has been of interest in contemporary scholarship in social work (for example, see Bywater & Jones 2007, Hafford-Letchfield 2008, Trotter & Leech 2003). Intrinsic to considerations of the sexual self and one's identity, however, has been the assumption that people may cogently speak about their sexuality without connectedness to a broader personal biography. If we argue that clients' intimate relationships and sexual selves are important to explore in contemporary assessment processes, it is important to know whether the assessment process itself is suited to the way identity is thought about in our late modern times. This involves asking whether we can separate out our sexuality from a broader identity.

This chapter reports on my recent empirical work in which thirty participants were asked to talk about their sexual selves. Through analysis of research data it was found that participants saw their biographies and wider identities as enmeshed with their sexual selves. The reflexive processes which participants engaged in to both create and sustain differing aspects of their selves draws from what I have termed as a 'de-differentiated self'. The de-differentiated self involves seeing sexuality only as part of one's biography and identity. I theorize that participants

can be seen to have responded to the complexities inherent in late modern life by traversing across traditionally erected identity categories. This way of seeing identity has importance to social work theorizing as well as practice, and some of the key implications for social work are considered in this chapter. Specifically this entails exploring assessment as the means through which identity is captured. Assessment, as a method and process central to social work, is therefore examined in light of the new appreciation of self-identity.

We begin this chapter by exploring in a little more detail the late-modern notion of reflexivity as it relates to identity generally. The research design, methods and findings as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the study are then outlined. I move on to examine how the study impacts upon current understandings of the sexual self in social work. The broader implications of the de-differentiated self are explored and we consider the existing template and core social work tool: assessment. The chapter concludes by summarizing the limitations of contemporary assessment practices and approaches as well as offering some suggestions for future research and scholarship in this important area of self-identity.

Reflexivity and late modernity

I am proposing that sexuality cannot be seen as separate from other aspects of the self. Further, I suggest that should we not try to understand contemporary identity, let alone our sexual selves, without reference to key shifts in social and interpersonal life in recent times. It is such references to changes and developments in our broader social sphere that assessment processes can underplay. In considering sexuality in social work, we therefore must ask: what are the features of contemporary social life and how do these manifest in interpersonal and social life?

We live in an environment that is under constant flux: changes brought about by technological advances, shifts in communicative patterns, as well as broader developments such as globalization are all argued to have impacted upon the way we live our day-to-day lives (Beck 1992, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Giddens 1991, Lash 2001, Urry 2003). For some, this has meant that intimate relationships are more temporary and fleeting and that without the traditional ties that once bound us to notions of duty within marriages, we have lost an important dimension to private life (Bauman 2004). For others, the flux in partnering patterns brought about by our late modern life, though both reflective and constitutive of the social milieu, has not meant the death of commitment, nor love: the ways these are manifest have simply 'transformed' (Giddens 1992). The particular forms these transformations are theorized to have taken depend on individual needs and personal requirements. Thus, relationships are negotiated based upon individuals' perceptions of self-satisfaction within the relationship (Giddens 1992). Asking oneself questions such as 'Am I happy?' 'Am I getting something from this relationship?' are examples of the thought processes involved in assessing the worth of one's relationship. In order to know whether one is happy or satisfied,

however, the person must be able to engage in reflexive processes. We now move on to consider this notion of reflexivity and how this is relevant to considerations of identity and the sexual self.

As I have noted, in developed countries the ever-changing self has been argued to have been one of the central characteristics of contemporary life, and integral to the re-making of selfhood is this concept of reflexivity. The notion of reflexivity is not new to social work. It can be seen in literature, for example, that relates the dynamic and fluid learning processes that students engage in when synthesizing theory and practice (Bogo & Vayda 1987). Yet reflexivity needs to be considered in a wider context to be broadly understood in relation to identity.

Reflexivity is a signifier for the nature of our constantly changing life, which can be seen to be manifest in both internalized and external, or social, processes. As Giddens notes: '[t]he reflexive project of the self ... consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives' (1991:5). Yet how do individuals engage in these processes?

One need only turn to popular culture to witness the ubiquity of revising one's biographical narratives. Celebrity culture, for example, in advertising has meant that aspirations for self-change are targeted through products that are positioned as pivotal to transformation (Kamins 1990). The global phenomenon of the popular reality television programme, Big Brother, documents individuals engaging in reflexive deliberations and sharing these processes with others. Viewers are given a snapshot of participants' identities at the beginning of the show and invited to witness the fleshing out and transformation of individuals as they explore and test out their identities and self-hood within the confines of the 'house'. Relating narratives of themselves to the strangers with whom they are sharing space is encouraged through the deployment of games, competitions and, arguably, alcohol and 'house rules'. Having no television to watch or books to read or paper to write with also promotes a physical environment conducive to conversation and self-disclosure. Television viewers watch as contestants explore their identities over the number of months in which the show is delivered, only to emerge back into a social sphere where they can reflexively deliberate about their Big Brother experience live on national television.

There are many complexities relating to identity exploration in the media and public spheres. For example, the question of the ethics of blending private and public space and compromising individual freedoms are challenged by the Big Brother format: so much so in Greece and Belgium that '[...] regulatory agencies intervened and made recommendations to the producers and broadcasters in the name of the protection of human dignity' (Frau-Meigs 2006:48). However what Big Brother and shows of a similar kind show us is how identity is formed and re-formed. The conversations in which participants reflect upon themselves, experiment with different identities and speak about self-change and transformation, illustrate not only reflexive processes but also are evocative of the social and global contexts in which these occur. Yet how do ordinary individuals (that is, those not on television) make sense of their identities and in particular, their sexual selves?

Researching everyday sexuality: design, methods and findings

The sexuality that is experienced in day-to-day life is what I have referred to elsewhere as individual, 'everyday sexuality' (Dunk 2007). The everyday level of analysis signifies a shift to the 'ordinariness' of social phenomena and recent scholarship has seen a turn towards the everyday (Gardiner 2008). Thus,

> [...] what has come to be known as 'everyday life studies' concerns itself with the supposition that to focus exclusively on the memorable, highly visible or extraordinary events of the sociocultural world is something akin to a category mistake, because to do so universalizes the atypical and ignores the overlooked norm (Gardiner 2004:229).

Everyday sexuality involves seeing people's intimate lives as unique yet mundane and this is a counterpoint to approaches in which sexuality is attributable to difference or pathology. In social work, the everyday dimension to experience has been neglected due to an orientation towards 'difficult' sexuality (Dunk 2007), whether this be deviant sexuality (see Heap 2003) or risky sexuality (Mort 1986, Ryan 2005).

Recent empirical work in both gender and sexuality reflect an interest in the everyday (for example, see Chisholm 2008, Morrissey & Higgs 2006, Tyler 2004, Wilton 2004), though to date there have been no studies in which individual, everyday sexuality is considered using identity theories to frame the findings. There is a clear need for empirical work in this area because identity theories allow for us to think about not only our everyday lives but our lives in relation to our broader social setting. As Jackson notes, investigating the everyday allows us to make connections and see patterns. She says:

> We need ... to understand more about the ordinary day-to-day patterns of sexual relations through/in which most people life their lives (Jackson 2008:34).

Since we know so little about how and what ordinary people think and feel about their sexualities (Jackson 2008), empirical work in the area of day-to-day sexuality provides an opportunity to better understand contemporary identity in relation to one's sexual self.

As the eminent sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) argues, in late modern life sexuality has taken on new significance for individuals. With the complex interplay of various economic and broader social changes, subjective life is theorized to be characterized by an increased awareness of self-identity. Invariably, this affects one's sexuality.

Giddens positions the sexual self as

> [...] something each of us 'has', or cultivates, [and is] no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs (1992:15).

Yet Giddens also points out that day-to-day individual sexuality needs elucidation. Specifically, we know little about how individuals perceive life events in contemporary society and the ways in which these experiences impact upon one's sexual self. Better understanding of this is important. He says:

> Somehow, in a way that has to be investigated, sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms (Giddens 1992:15).

Giddens' (Giddens 1992) 'reflexive project of the self' speaks from the perspective of day-to-day life because these everyday practices and intimate relationships are theorized (Crook 1998). Additionally, in late modern life, reflexivity is argued to be a part of the everyday (see Adams 2006, Adkins 2003). My empirical work sought to understand how individuals made sense of their sexual selves through dialogue with research participants in which reflections about their sense-making about sexuality could be heard and understood.

Unstructured interviews (Gilbert 2001) were conducted with thirty participants, which consisted of fifteen women and fifteen men. The mean age for male participants was 44.8 years and for female participants, 43.7 years. Snowballing sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) was used as a recruiting method. Studying everyday sexuality was comparable with typical case sampling because this approach seeks to avoid selecting 'atypical' or 'deviant' populations (Patton 2002: 236). Although this study was small scale and non-representative, it provided an opportunity to investigate, in great depth, how individuals think about their sexual selves. The findings allow us to rethink social work assessment in relation to the sexual self and identity.

Findings: sexuality and broader identity

In order to explain their sexualities or sexual selves, participants involved in this study recounted other manifestations of identity that traditionally can be seen to fall outside what we might consider to be relevant to one's sexuality. In other words, sexuality was explicable only in relation to other identities in subjective and social life: the sexual self was contingent upon other realms of experience and identity. For example, I asked Ruth if she could describe her sexual self. Ruth responded with describing items of clothing – such as boots – that held symbolic meaning for her sexuality. In particular, it is the response from others within a work setting that propels Ruth to reflect upon her sexuality as well as her broader identity. The reaction of others enables her to explore her own self in which narratives relating to her gender, her sexuality, her work persona and the broader organizational context she finds herself in are all intertwined. She says:

> […] like the boots that I've got on today. I remember, I've had these boots for about 6 years. The first time I ever wore them I remember someone saying to me 'Oh you can't wear those in this environment' 'why not?' 'well they're fuck off boots, aren't they?' you know, and I'm like 'no, they're my boots and I like them and I'm going to wear them'. You know, there is no flesh showing, but yes, they are leather boots that come all the way up to my knees. And I like them![…]Um, you know, I'm a heterosexual person, um, and having been questioned by partners in the past on um, 'cause I'm quite a conservative dresser- I don't tend to be any way outlandish in my dress, um but often because depending on – especially shorter term relationships in that sort of period of time (because they were never going to last) that notion of, um, when you spend the majority of your days, I don't know different now that I'm in this sort of environment but I did work in the private sector and I've worked in the education sector and I've worked in the federal government where very very significantly male dominated so everything I did would be surrounded by, you know, well-suited, well-heeled, successful well-off blokes, which is quite threatening and can sometimes then have an impact on me and how you balance all of that out and how you see yourself in those different roles. (Ruth, 39 years, Executive Director)

It is only through looking at Ruth's entire response that one gains a sense of the connection between dressing, work and her sexual self. In fact it was only through another, important identity of 'worker' that Ruth *was able* to convey the complexities and tensions inherent in her sexual self. Removed from the private sphere most often associated with intimacy, Ruth's depiction of how clothing, gender and power played out within the work context all provided important threads in which the narrative of sexuality could come together.

For other participants, the cultural dimension to the workplace impacted upon their sexual selves in that it was the professional sphere that, to some extent, dictated how relationships were forged. Emile, for example, recounts the demographic and sheer number of the workers as being significant to the work culture.

> And back to that school idea where it is kind of a social phenomenon, being overtly sexual, in my twenties I worked at the Casino which is where I met my wife and it was just like going back to school. Because you had, I think there was three or four hundred employees all of similar ages, a lot of them were single and it was just like being back at school. It was just ridiculous. (Emile, 32 years, Primary Carer for son)

For Rowan, he and his fellow workers engaged in sexual experimentation within the workplace. Employed at the time as a sessional worker in a ski resort, Rowan describes how the geographical space and social norms of the work environment lent itself to exploratory sexual behaviour.

> […] a ski bum […] The sexuality aspect of that, I was suddenly in a very sexualized environment. There was a lot of drugs. There was a lot of alcohol. And there was a lot of sex. And the first girl I hooked up with there was bisexual which led to threesomes and just this very anything goes kind of situations you have. And things that you became more, that originally I would have thought would take a while to get to this point were now very common. You know, um groups of people were having sex in the same room. We were going out and we knew that part of the room was going to be a bunch of people were going to having sex in the spa and we were going to be watching each other and you know that was part of the thing. I really I was actually I was very comfortable with my sexuality at that point. […] Very much my definition of myself at [resort name] was being that kind of guy. (Rowan, 34 years, Youth Worker)

We have seen in the above accounts the diverse ways that the workplace and the sexual self were experienced. In each of the excerpts, we can see the way that participants mapped out the relationship between their identities as workers and their sexual identities. The centre-stage position that work plays in everyday life may have meant that drawing connections between sexuality and work is not significant enough to warrant a reconfiguration of the way we think about sexuality were it not for the fact that other identities were similarly drawn upon by participants. These included differing roles played through participation in sport, religion and spiritual activities as well as experiences with formal and informal educative structures seemingly unrelated to the sexual self. For Davina, Marijka and Jane for example, theories encountered through university studies meant that they were able to reflect upon and transform their sexual and gendered selves. They explain specifically how this occurred in the following accounts that describe the synergistic coming together of ideological and theoretical ideas with personal experience and self identity. The result for each of these women was a 'transformed' identity. For Davina, this transformation came at a time when she was re-thinking her sexual relationships with men.

> Like I think that a big part of wanting a non-monogamous relationship in my 20s was one, being at uni, um one, I had a child and was at uni, I was doing a philosophy degree and I ended up studying a lot of feminist theory and realising that I actually wasn't happy with the… way that I was understanding my sexuality and the way that I was interacting with men around my sexuality … (Davina, 39 years, Counsellor/Social Worker)

Marijka embodied the theoretical and ideological ideas: the broad scholarship of feminism translated into a personal statement and affinity which affected her very identity and sense of self. She says:

> […] finally finding feminism and saying, having the guts to say, so what I did was cut my hair I, like really extreme I think, just to make a point. I cut my hair,

> I think my partner at the time cut my hair and I had a tail and it was like oh my God, do you have to, because at the time I had curly locks, I had curly locks and, you know, beautiful clothes [....] And then grew my hair, my legs, didn't shave any more. And so, all those outward signs because I could see now, it doesn't really matter; I can do what I like. (Marijka, 53 years, Programme Manager)

Jane explains that the coming together of broader social shifts was very much a part of her making sense of her sexual identity as well as a larger sense of who she is. Religion, studies in criminology and discriminatory legislation in which same-sex sexual behaviour was prohibited all came together within the university setting. Jane explains:

> So like a very formative experience for me was university study around criminology [...] we had a choice of topic at one point and I chose to look at the laws against homosexuality. So this was in 1971 when I was only 18 or so and at ah and you know I had a background of um Catholicism and ah social justice era of Vatican 2 and era of the second wave of feminism. You know? Some very contradictory forces. But very intense ones. And so I think I was a sitting duck to really want to absorb this different way of thinking about sexuality ... (Jane, 53 years, Counsellor)

Similarly, David's sexuality would not make sense without reference to other areas of identity and ideology. Tracing the influencing factors not only to his university education, but when he undertook his education, David explains how these differing aspects of social and personal life have come together:

> [...] perceptions and self sense of my sexuality and things, I suppose the main issues there were the things that derived more from, I suppose, intellectual and / or ideological issues about issues such as monogamy and the basis for relationships and all those sorts of things. And that's, I suppose, coming from having been, having gone to uni in the late '70's into the early '80's initially just, I suppose a developing sense based upon broadly socialist themes type philosophies about the way in which people and social systems work. (David, 50 years, Social Planner)

Despite differing roles such as student and worker coming together in these accounts, identity was not depicted as simply unified. Rather, differing aspects of identity were talked about as co-existing alongside shifts and changes within people's social, political and spatial environments, and all of these areas were in dynamic interchange with one another. As one respondent, Bernadette, noted, the unification of seemingly disparate identities connects aspects from one role to other roles:

> But you know you have different faces for different occasion ... Because I don't feel that the person that I am at work is that much different from the person that I am with my friends or the person that I am with my husband who's my lover. (Bernadette, 34 years, Librarian)

As we have seen, participants in this study recruited other identities and roles in social life in order to explain and make sense of their sexual selves. In participants' accounts, we can see the dynamic interchange between differing spheres of experience and how external influences such as work and education prompted people to re-think their identities. These reflexive mechanisms explain the process that participants use to form their identities. Yet reflexivity alone does not account for explaining why differing identities were used to explain the sexual self. I propose that a de-differentiated identity, that is, one that sees sexuality as connected to other narratives of the self, is more in line with how individuals in the late modern age experience identity. Put simply, the de-differentiated self means seeing the various notions of identity labels such as 'mother', 'worker', 'lover', 'friend', 'student' as interconnected with one another. This is opposed to seeing the sexual self as completely distinct and cut off from other identities.

Yet what is de-differentiation? Broadly speaking, de-differentiation refers to the collapsing of previously established categories. For example, blurring the boundaries between the economy and culture (du Gay 1993) is an example of de-differentiation, and a signal for our late modern times. Paul du Gay explains that:

> [i]n contemporary British retailing there is no longer any room for the base/superstructure dichotomy. As the 'economic' folds seamlessly into the 'cultural', distinctions between 'production', 'consumption' and 'everyday life' become less clear cut (du Gay 1993:583).

Participants in my study used their roles such as worker, parent, student or lover to help explain their sexual selves. They did not distinguish, or *differentiate*, between 'selves'. Instead, they presented a de-differentiated identity. Yet why did they do this? I propose that the de-differentiated self is representative, and constitutive of, contemporary social life. Put simply: the de-differentiated self is a sign for our times. As Rojek (1993) points out, a de-differentiated social sphere is indicative of where we are historically. This is because de-differentiation

> [...] may be formally defined as the condition in which former social, economic, political, and cultural differentiations cease to obtain. It is therefore associated with ferment, restlessness, fresh sensations, stimulations and the ever-new (Rojek 1993:16).

In this next section of the chapter, we move to consider how the notion of a de-differentiated identity allows us to move on from more traditional notions of the self and sexuality. Specifically, the implications for the social work are considered.

The de-differentiated self and social work

In social work the fragmentation of differentiated spheres has been variously theorized, however broader social changes are largely framed alongside postmodern theories (Howe, 1994, Parton 1994). Yet, applying de-differentiation to notions of identity enables for broader social shifts to be considered. Specifically, in order to account for the complexity and contingent landscape of late modern everyday life, people make sense of their sexual selves by selectively referencing all aspects of social and interpersonal life. In this way, identity is more than just a collection of differing roles. Rather, it is a labyrinthine collection of interlocking narratives, recalled events and experiences. Asking someone to solely define their sexual selves for the purposes of completing a section in a social work assessment in this context then, appears to be a pointless exercise. In fact social work assessments invariably compartmentalize identity. Yet social work assessment, as both a skill and a tool, is firmly historically and ontologically grounded within the profession of social work.

Assessments in social work generally take an ecological approach (Adamson & Deverell 2009) which means that information about the individual as well as their social setting may be captured. Yet there are many aspects to our everyday lives: people live in complex relationships and settings with differing experiences of privilege and or disempowerment. Constructing categories in which these complexities can be explored, whilst beneficial, prevents the capturing of nuances or interfaces between such categories. This has an impact for sexuality because of its association with identity. Writing over twenty years ago, Vigilante and Mailick highlight the problems with compartmentalizing selfhood or identity. Specifically, they argue that

> [...] the assessment process has been constrained by social workers limiting clinical investigation to either intrapsychic components or environmental problems, thus inappropriately separating intrapsychic factors from social factors (Vigilante & Mailick 1988:101).

Yet assessment is ubiquitous in social work education and practice. This may be in part because assessments offer a practical way or 'framework' (Department of Health, 2000) in which identity can be clearly arranged. Sexuality is argued by some to be '...an important part of a thorough psychosocial history' (Cagle & Bolte 2009:233). Yet can sexuality be easily assigned to a category within an assessment? One of the criticisms Lord Laming recently made regarding social work assessment related to the 'tick box' (Laming 2009) nature of the activity.

Consider the narratives I have presented above from my research participants. How might these accounts fit with a traditional social work assessment? All of the information they provided about other areas of identity would have been excluded for not fitting under the heading of 'sexuality'. Indeed participant accounts of their sexual selves traversed so many identity categories and referenced various social

elements (such as employment) that make it difficult to capture in a standardized format such as assessment formats.

Postmodern or critical approaches in social work have made significant scholarly contributions, whether this is through the re-configuring of personal action to collective action through human rights discourses (Ife 2001) or the disrupting of traditionally accepted epistemologies (Healy 2005, McDonald 2006, Pease & Fook 1999). In terms of assessment, postmodernist approaches emphasize the mutuality which characterizes the relationship between service user and worker (Fook 2002) and do better at accounting for agency than other approaches in which the social worker is cast as the 'expert'. Yet the very nature of the assessment task is to capture one's needs (Payne 2005: 107) based on a synthesized account of one's identity and selfhood. This being the case, using traditional forms of assessment in our late modern times is a somewhat flawed method of capturing one's identity, and therefore one's sexuality.

Yet if we accept that sexuality is an important dimension to one's identity and selfhood, then social work must account for its presence. Additionally, social workers need to see the sexual self as an important and legitimate dimension of human experience and selfhood (Dunk 2007). Yet how can existing methods of capturing identity account for the de-differentiation that we see in the above accounts? Case notes, genograms and other traditional ways of summarizing and communicating client information and selfhood are somewhat clunky fixtures in social work that do not easily accommodate a de-differentiated identity. Given the complex, changing nature of social life and identity, we need social work methods that enable these elements to be explored.

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, one of the key ways that we may characterize contemporary social life is by considering the conditions that exemplify late modern social and subjective life. The constant state of change that characterizes our social setting today has seen a shift in the ways in which individuals express and make sense of their personal lives and identities (see Beck 1992, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Giddens 1991, Lash 2001, Urry 2003). Increased reflexivity, for example, has meant that we now think more about our identities than ever before (Giddens 1991). Rapid technological change is yet another feature of late modern life (Giddens 1991, Lash 2001). These two developments may be utilized in social work in order to develop new ways of exploring client identity and selfhood.

For example, establishing more creative and flexible methods in which service users might explore their selfhood, which includes their sexual selves, is one way forward. There has been some promising work in the area of identity and 'creative methods' by sociologist David Gauntlett (2007). His research entailed '... people ... [being] asked to make things, and then reflect on them, rather than having to speak instant reports or 'reveal' themselves in verbal discussion' (Gauntlett 2007:92). Participants used Lego to construct metaphorical models of their identities and were invited to explain how the models related to their identities and then to complete a questionnaire. Here are two examples of how

participants found the exercise. For one woman, building the model '... helped me discover my identity in new ways, see things from a different angle but it was not easy to explain it in words ...' whilst another liked the flexible nature of the materials '... because you can always go back to the construction and change, add or remove what doesn't fit. A lot easier than words' (Gauntlett 2007:165). Additionally, the visual nature of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook as well as their ubiquity tell us that these platforms appeal to people. Characterized by flexibility and self-design, these are further examples of a visual method that enables shifting, reflexive conceptions of identity: that is, identity can be made and remade.

In some areas of social work emerging technologies have been embraced, such as in the growing area of online counselling (Haberstroh, Duffey, Evans, Gee & Trepal 2007) as well as online support groups (Barak, Boniel-Nissim & Suler 2008). Designing pedagogy relating to sexuality for online use has also been found to be effective (Weerakoon 2003, Weerakoon & Wong 2002). There is room for further exploration into how social work might combine traditional methods with new technologies by using creative approaches that take into account the late modern social setting in which practice is immersed. It is only in understanding the current make-up of identity as well as how the sexual self is located within this that social work can hope to remain responsive to late modern life and ultimately, to the late modern de-differentiated identity I have identified.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored some of the key questions about identity and the sexual self in social work. Analysing empirical work in which participants were invited to talk about their everyday sexualities raised questions about the suitability of traditional social work methods and tools such as the social work assessment. The de-differentiated self was argued to represent late modern social life, in which identity is shifting and contingent upon structural and interpersonal experiences as well as linked to reflexive mechanisms. Whilst some suggestions for future directions in considering the sexual self, identity and social work were made, ultimately, it is only through re-coding identity in social work as de-differentiated that we may then move on to consider how best to respond to this new and shifting terrain.

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